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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3183  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN PRIORITY 2005  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000367

SIPDIS

NEA/ARP, NEA/IPA FOR ASACHAR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/14/2018

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR SPECIAL ENVOY MITCHELL VISIT TO KUWAIT

Classified By: Ambassador Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Special Envoy Mitchell, my staff and I look forward to welcoming you to Kuwait. Your visit represents the first official high-level engagement of Kuwait's leadership by the Obama Administration. We have requested meetings with Kuwaiti Amir Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Jaber Al Sabah and Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed al-Sabah al-Salem Al Sabah. Kuwait's leadership will be deeply interested in your ideas for advancing Israel/Palestine peace, and may also engage you on Iran and Iraq.

Kuwait Snapshot

¶2. (C) Kuwait is small in area (about the size of New Jersey) and population (approximately one million Kuwait citizens and two million expatriates), but its small size belies its economic weight, its strategic importance and, above all, its value as a welcoming platform for U.S. military and strategic engagement in this troubled region. Beneath Kuwait's sands lie the world's fifth-largest proven reserves of oil, key to the country's high standard of living and relatively high level of aid to other Muslim states. Nestled at the head of the Arabian Gulf between Iraq and Iran, Kuwait has always relied on outside powers for defense against its difficult neighbors.

A Vibrant But Adolescent Democracy

¶3. (C) Kuwait has an occasionally unruly, consensual democratic structure led for more than 200 years by the ruling Al Sabah family, and is in the midst of a campaign to elect a new Parliament on May 16. The Amir dissolved the last Parliament on March 18 following repeated attempts by Members of Parliament to "grill" the Prime Minister (also a member of the ruling family) on a variety of charges. Overall, Kuwait is experiencing a period of perceived drift owing to weak leadership emanating from the ruling family and the Government on one hand, and disruptive and sometimes irresponsible challenges from Members of Parliament, on the other. To a considerable degree, these difficulties reflect the political emergence of a growing class of "tribalist" Kuwaitis who are now challenging the grasp on power that Kuwait's elite mercantile class has traditionally enjoyed. Kuwait's present parliamentary troubles are, however, largely an internal matter and there is nothing in them to suggest a threat to the immediate future of the US/Kuwait bilateral relationship, which enjoys strong public support.

Kuwait and the Israel/Palestine Issue

¶4. (C) The GOK plays a generally positive role in support of Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts, including backing for the Palestinian Authority, the Quartet Principles, and the Arab Peace Plan, and has been an advocate of moderation in Arab League discussions. The December 2008 Israeli incursion into Gaza caused a great deal of anguish here. The GOK has contributed significantly (figures provided below) to the Palestinian Authority and is generally supportive of Mahmoud Abbas and the Fatah movement. The GOK does not recognize Hamas, but the conservative elements within the now dissolved Kuwaiti parliament publicly expressed opposition to Abu Mazen in favor of Hamas, especially during the Gaza incursion. Kuwait is among the 34 countries that do not recognize Israel. Frustration levels with the current impasse in the "peace process," and the formation of the Netanyahu government, have led the GOK to consider supporting a unilateral Palestinian declaration of Statehood, with boundary determinations to follow. (Note: FM Dr. Mohammed Al Sabah told me April 15 that Jordan's King Abdullah may explore this initiative with President Obama when they meet on April 21. End note.)

#### Kuwaiti Assistance to Palestinians

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¶5. (C) Since 2002, the Government of Kuwait has committed over USD 830 million in assistance to the Palestinians. Of this amount, it has delivered two major contributions totaling USD 276 million to the Palestinian Authority, USD 196 million under the auspices of the Beirut Summit and USD 80 million (in August 2008) under a USD 300 million Paris Club pledge. The remaining USD 554 million consists of

KUWAIT 00000367 002 OF 002

current pledges, USD 220 million (remaining from the original pledge) at the December 2007 Paris Conference, USD 200 million for the rebuilding of Gaza at the March 2009 Sharm Al-Shaykh meeting, and USD 34 million to the UNRWA committed in January 2009. Kuwait also has standing annual pledges of USD 1.5 million to the UNRWA and USD 1 million to UNHCR. The Kuwait Red Crescent, independent of the GOK, has delivered USD 8.34 million in emergency aid to Palestine since 2006.

#### Kuwaiti Views Toward Palestinians

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¶6. (C) Kuwait's historical attitude to Palestinians has been ambivalent, to say the least. Prior to the Iraqi invasion, Palestinians were prominently placed in professional positions throughout the country. However, due to PLO support for Saddam Hussein, and the collaboration of many Palestinians with Iraqi forces during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, mass expulsions of Palestinians followed the 1991 liberation of Kuwait and to date the GOK has not authorized the opening of a "Palestinian Authority" office nor is the PA represented by an Ambassador here (although there is a PLO "administrative" office). Nevertheless, Kuwaiti sympathies largely lie with the perceived plight of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The GOK welcomed your appointment as a serious USG step to promote Israeli/Palestinian peace and looks forward to beginning a formal dialogue with you this week.

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